

bought a ticket for New Jersey and got on the plane.

15.

Keenan at Nine Months

Alright, I'm going to put the Month of Darkness aside for awhile. Let's go back to when I was nine months old. It was around this time that I started to go a little stir crazy. I was itchy for unrestrained experience. None of this chaperoned baby bullshit anymore. If you're cognizant of the outside world, babyhood is like prison: constantly watched, fed, and forced to live by someone else's schedule. I reasoned that freedom was not going to happen unless I freed myself...*in the middle of the night*. I went from being daunted by my tiny earthly form to being excited about new earthly possibilities. This took the form of my top secret "nightwalks".

There was a lot of intelligence gathering. I studied my parents' sleeping habits. From two in the morning until dawn, they kept an unchanging sleep schedule. But just before sleep, one of them—usually Lou—would get up, check on me, empty her bladder, and return to bed; then Drew would get up and do pretty much the same thing. After that, they'd sleep undisturbed without any deviation. When I became confident of their schedule, I decided that it was time to rediscover the outside world—even if that outside world consisted of only our marginally-employed neighbors.

I figured like any cat burglar, I should dress in black. A midget in commando drag. Sadly, the darkest clothes I owned were a black toddler-size AC-DC t-shirt (courtesy Uncle Joe), dark blue pajama bottoms, a dark blue Disney cap, and tiny dark green sneakers. I dressed as a sneak thief by way of a concert parking lot.

On the big night, Mom checked in on me at one a.m., and about forty-five minutes later my sleepy-eyed dad lumbered in to peek at me. After my father's ghostly face disappeared, I waited about five minutes and climbed out of bed. While the parentals didn't get up until seven, I had to be inside well before sunrise, lest someone think there was a monkey loose in the neighborhood.

In the four months since I'd learned to walk, I'd grown very sure of my new body. I was a big lug in my past life, but the unlikely combination of musical theatre and kickboxing had made me a big, *agile* lug. Keenan Harris became

pretty sure-footed, and I ran amok all over the house climbing anything taller than, well, me. That's why the grups called me "Monkey".

Now, dressed in that aforementioned tiny commando costume, I peeked down the dark hallway echoing with snores from both Mom and Dad. I trod lightly past their bedroom and made my way to the back door, eyes adjusting to the darkness. I held my breath as I reached up and unlocked the door, turned the knob and slowly opened it.

The intoxicating smell of a sultry Indian summer breathed sweetly in my face. A dog barked in the distance. I stepped out and eased the door almost closed but not all the way. I didn't have a key.

Imagine my surprise to find myself unfettered in the outside world after nine months of captivity...in a body the size of a Capuchin. *Unreal!* My lungs filled with night air scented with jasmine.

Now what do I do?

I kept close to the bushes and made my way toward the side gate. The fence was about six feet tall—from my height, it looked sixty. I swung up onto the gray iron water meter, then onto the top of the plastic garbage can, unlatching the gate. The squawk of the hinge seemed deafening. It surprised me and I pressed myself into the shadows to listen. Nothing. Carefully climbing down, I exited the yard, leaving the gate open.

Relying on slightly-open doors and gates was getting me edgy, but being out of doors was worth it. It was so odd being under the night sky. Exhilarated but vulnerable, the size of a terrier but lacking teeth, lacking speed. All I had was the protection of the shadows.

I rolled under the hedge on the side lawn, then lay prone. I inched forward toward the street, and the leafy hedge perfectly concealed me from the hard yellow sodium light beaming down from the streetlamp high above. The neighborhood was quiet except for the odd car passing by every so often, piloted by a tired waitress, a drunk teenager. I'm not sure how much time went by as I lay there, taking in the alien night. It'd been at least since Halloween 1981 that I'd hid under a bush, but this time there were no cops in sight, this time I wasn't buzzed on my stepdad's pot.

Under a car across the street, glowing eyes fixed upon me. The cat finally got curious enough to cross toward me. Halfway across it stopped to lick a paw, studying me. It was a big orange-striped tabby. It trotted straight up to me and

meowed. I reached forward and it rubbed its nose against my small hand. I pulled my hand back, sinking deeper under the hedge. We sat in silent conference for some minutes. As it purred, I thought about my next move.

Footsteps! Suddenly, the cat was snatched up!

“Tristan!” the woman said. She breathed heavily. All I could see were yellow running shoes and the cuffs of matching sweats. This woman, of whom I could see little, was on a 3:00 a.m. jog.

“What’s up, kittiwittikins?” Yellow Sneakers said. “What are you doing all the way out here?” She set the cat down again, patted it on the head, said, “Hurry home!” and jogged on. The cat named Tristan looked over at me, meowed, turned and trotted away.

When she was out of sight, I poked out my head, looked around, then scuttled across the neighbor’s lawn to the next house, two doors down from us. Avoiding the light, I skirted the yellowing rose bushes and made it to the far side of the neighbor’s yard. I was a small escaped simian, a Curious George, hiding twixt battered garbage can and metal gate.

Young voices issued from the side yard.

I carefully pushed through the neighbor’s unlatched gate; the voices came from an open window adjacent to a junk-strewn side-yard. Perfectly still, I listened. There was the syrup of booze in their young voices, perhaps pot. I should’ve left right then, but my curiosity got the better of me and I took a look around. Under the window there was a convenient stack of threadbare tires, and I climbed them until my eyes were level with the bottom of the open window. My tiny nine-month-old head, stocking-capped like a tiny burglar, peeked through the rickety blinds.

My sensitive nose picked up sandalwood incense masking the funk of pot, sex, unwashed clothes, spilled beer and perhaps a hidden pizza box.

Amidst the gothy punk rock decor, it took me a second to figure out that I was looking at the bedroom of a teenage girl. Concert posters hung on the wall next to draped screen-printed banners of rock stars I’d never heard of—21 Pilots and Imagine Dragons? There was a mish-mash of stuffed animals, softcore S&M accoutrement, and marijuana paraphernalia. Against the wall, on top of a dorm-room refrigerator, was an altar of sorts to grunge-god Chris Cornell. A legion of spent, half-melted candles (only one lit) pooled at the foot of a picture collage of

Cornell doing his sexy howling, scowling, rockstar best.

I thought: *What the fuck?! Chris Cornell is dead?*

This severely bummed me out, but I didn't have time for that.

At the edge of the bed, on top of the purple leopard print comforter, a shaggy-haired guy with brown-olive skin gurgled a hit from a tall red plastic bong covered with stickers. His ears were bedazzled with steel, his naked torso glistened with sweat. The guy's accent was so very San Jose: "Yeah, man, my bro is all up in the shit with Chanelle n shit. Like white on, you know, whatever, man." *Suuuuuuck, guuuuuurgle*. He held the smoke in, red-faced.

His companion was a skinny, pale pixie-haired white girl of 17-going-on-30, pacing back and forth, wearing nothing but a thin skull-emblazoned tank top. Smear'd lipstick, smear'd mascara, smear'd expression. She was nursing a bloody nose with a wadded-up paper towel. She also glistened with sweat. Her voice was a husky staccato.

"Rico don't know shit from nothing. Chanelle still got her cherry and she ain't givin' it up to no 'banger from South Hoser, David." She pronounced his name '*Dah-veed*'.

Oddly, I sensed that this was their version of pillow talk but I couldn't tell if they were pre- or post-coital. Finally, he put down the bong and swept her mid-pace onto his lap and into his sinewy brown tattooed arms.

"David!"

"How's your nose, baby?"

"That shit's messed up, man." She kissed him. "It's okay." She planted another one on him and they tongue-wrestled for sec. Then his eyes drifted over to the window and—*he saw me!*

Fuck! I thought.

"What the fuck was that?! *Fuck!*" David shouted.

I was already gone. I launched myself off the stack of tires, landed squarely on my feet, and headed for the gate. I heard a thump from inside the house—the girl being ejected from his lap. Once through the gate, my little feet propelled me as fast they could across the neighbor's lawn back toward our house.

In the silence of the night I could clearly hear him at the window, frantically telling her, "I swear to God there was a little gnome or some shit at the window.

I *swear to God!*"

"David! You saw a *what?* You're high!"

"A gnome! Fuck me! I'm going out front."

"Come on—you're all loaded n shit. There ain't no ... *thing* ... out my window...you'll wake my mom!"

I heard him scrambling through the house. I was across the lawn and through the rose bushes and under our hedge again. I froze. I heard David careen through the backyard and clamor and curse through the side-yard, and then burst out of the gate, coming to a stop in their driveway.

The young man came all the way out onto the sidewalk, shirtless, his bare, tattooed chest puffed out and, yes, he carried a pistol in his hand. Gangbanger-in-training, high as a kite, looking for a gnome. Priceless.

Across the street I saw Tristan-the-Cat's eyes glow at me from under the car.

The girl hissed from the porch: "Get in here right now, you freak! Someone will call the cops!"

After a few glances up and down the block, David cursed and went back inside. When I was sure the neighborhood was once more at peace, I crawled from under the hedge, closed the gate, slipped through the back door, and locked it. I stopped and listened to the house and the parents' gentle rhythmic snores. Satisfied I was in the clear, I snuck back to my room, changed out of my commando nightwalk gear, and snuggled very contentedly in my crib.

It was almost four in the morning.

16.

Keenan at Seven Years

Whew! It's like an oven up here. I have the windows open and a lemonade on ice. Hear the tinkle of the cubes? Dad is home for lunch and I can hear him talking on the phone downstairs. He never gets a break anymore. I do not miss adult responsibilities.

About an hour ago, I was walking home from the 7-Eleven with Ralphy when he came to an abrupt halt.

"Oh, crap, there's Jimmy Stewart."

I looked across the street and saw three kids dawdling on the corner. Jimmy, athletic with dark hair, was a classic bully, and he had made tormenting Ralphy

into a personal project. I told Ralphy the next time he faces off with him just to kick him in the balls, but Ralphy doesn't have the intestinal fortitude for that. Jimmy is nine years old and about three inches taller than Ralphy; he has about four or five on me. Then there's his posse: Carey Estrada and Mo Konduz, dumb and dumber. The kid bully trifecta.

We weighed the situation.

"Okay, look. This is silly. He's just a chump in a bully disguise," I reassured.

"I heard he broke Sam Bullworth's nose."

"Sam got hit with a softball in the face." But I could see the panic in Ralphy's eyes. "Look, we are going to walk right past him like nothing's going on. If he says anything, let me do the talking. If any of them threaten me, I'm going for the balls."

He was really in a panic now. "Let's just walk around the block."

"They already see us. If it gets ugly, just scream and start throwing punches like a crazy person. They'll leave us alone, believe me."

"Keen!"

I started walking. "We're doing this. Have some self-respect, Ralphy."

Fortunately, every kid at school knew I could be a little terror if pushed. I was counting on them backing off.

Ralphy reluctantly followed me. We crossed the street right in front of the terrible trio. They did what was traditionally expected of them, stepping in front of us and blocking our way.

Jimmy said, "Hey, it's Ralph-Mouth and his freak side-kick."

Mo: "Yeah, freak."

Carey grunted.

Jimmy had a nose too big for his face and greasy straight hair. Mo was olive-skinned and sort of chunky. Carey was about Ralphy's height with thick curly black hair.

I sighed. "Really? Look, we are sorry. Let us please pass."

Ralphy looked at me pleadingly.

Jimmy stepped forward. "Shut up, loser. I wasn't talking to you. What are

you sorry for anyway?"

I chuckled. "Whatever you're mad about."

"I'm not mad."

"Then why are you being mean and blocking our path?"

This question gave him pause. But being confused is hard. He spat, "I said shut up, shrimp!" He stepped up right in my face. I had hoped they'd just beg off. Oh, well.

I laughed at Jimmy and said, "Look, why don't you and your two fuck-tard friends here just fuck the fuck off before I fucking damage you." This sudden barrage of foul language took them aback. Mo and Carey glanced at Jimmy, unsure if I was actually a threat. I'd learned that extreme gutter mouth was an effective tactic for playground fights. Most of the time.

"Fuck you!" Jimmy said, pushing me. I was ready for this, and I caught his right hand and twisted it in a simple wrist lock. He yelped in pain and, being twenty-five pounds heavier than me, easily twisted his way out of it.

He stood back for a second, clutching his wrist. "Goddamn it!" He started to go for me again when who came shooting past me, arms all a-flail, but good ol' Ralphy, screaming bloody murder and windmilling his arms like a crazy person. The bullies were very puzzled by this and took a step back. As Ralphy bee-lined toward them, Mo simply pushed him into the bushes next to the 7-Eleven parking lot. Ralphy's war-cry changed pitch as he became tangled in the branches. Now the bullies didn't know which target to pick. Jimmy focused on me.

"You're dead, freak."

"Too late, motherfucker."

"I'll break your face."

But before any further melee could continue, the white-haired manager of the 7-Eleven, no doubt having heard Ralphy's hollering, was suddenly out in the lot with his broom and dust pan. "Everything alright boys?"

It was hard to know who he was talking to, but the man's presence, with his official-looking white smock and manager's badge, instantly diffused the situation. Still caught in the bushes, Ralphy fell silent.

Jimmy took this opportunity to save face. He corralled his companions. "Let's go, dudes." He turned and pointed at us, grinning. "Can't wait to run into you again, jerk-offs." He lingered on me. "You got lucky, freakazoid."

The convenience store manager watched as the boys walked away, grumbling

with nervous bravado. He caught my eye and gave me a little salute.

“Take it easy on ’em, Keenan,” he said.

“Thanks, Mr. C.”

Ralph finally emerged from the bushes, very puffed up.

Dusting himself off, he said, “I think those guys were a little scared of me!”

“You might be right.” I fist-bumped him. “Thanks for having my back, even if you were a raving lunatic.”

“You told me to do it!”

“I did, and you were great. Thanks.”

We walked back home silently on the sweltering streets, through a broken fence. At his house he said, “Wanna watch something?”

“Naw. I got stuff to do.” I suddenly hugged him. He let me for a second, then was uncomfortable. I let go and turned.

“See you, Keenan.”

“See you tomorrow, Ralph-Mouth.”

“Okay, Freakazoid.”

So now I’m sitting here next to my army men, drinking lemonade. Let’s get back to what happened after Chris died.

17.

K.S. Goes AWOL

Imagine my surprise when, after the Month of Darkness, I found myself in New Jersey.

Hillsdale, New Jersey, was where my remaining best friend, Dennis, lived. We’d both gone to high school with Chris. Back in the day, when I wasn’t living with Chris, I was probably living with Dennis. Chris probably understood me better, but Dennis was my artistic partner until the bastard wised up, found a great wife and moved to Jersey. Sadly, when I turned forty, I was still single, partying like the rock star I clearly wasn’t.

When I suddenly showed up at his house in Hillsdale at 9:00 p.m. on a